

## *The Lithuanians Speak*

**B**Y THE unanimous vote of a democratically elected parliament, Lithuania has declared its sovereignty restored. Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union swallowed up the three independent Baltic states 50 years ago. Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union started out resisting restoration, but he also sponsored the imperial retreat and internal relaxation that unleashed popular sentiment and produced the Sunday result. Lithuania's independence proclamation is the latest in a series of remarkable events in the Gorbachev era that wise heads said would never come to pass. Each event, announced to gasps of wonder, soon becomes the baseline for the next advance. The end, fortunately, is not in sight.

The real astonishment, of course, is that Soviet authorities are even contemplating accepting the principle of a republic's secession. Not that they are being magnanimous about the terms. Mr. Gorbachev has laid down some tough opening markers for the negotiations that a brave but dependent Lithuania has invited on the economic, ethnic and territorial issues arising from a half-century's forced entanglement. He may be ready to accept the logic of perestroika, but the man who pronounced Lithuania's independence proclamation "alarming" is obviously apprehensive

about the new republic's possibly costly and contagious example.

All the actors will be measuring the center's response to this most frontal of assaults on its authority. What is being measured is not simply Mr. Gorbachev's personal broad-mindedness or political standing but his whole bold thesis that the inescapable pains of reform will in due time bring compensating gains.

In the American response to Lithuania's choice there is celebration but also a note of reserve. The United States kept the faith for 50 years by refusing to recognize Moscow's illegal incorporation of the Baltics. American diplomacy then made its own contribution to ensuring that the Soviet empire, in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region, would devolve and would devolve peacefully. Anxious Lithuanians and some others ask that the United States insert itself directly on the smaller party's side into what are bound to be extended and difficult negotiations between Moscow and Vilnius. But the American interest lies in promoting the steady, unprovocative and irreversible expansion of freedom, and the role of engaged outsider encouraging the parties to deal with each other remains the right one—the one that will do the Lithuanians most good—for Washington to assume.